



## Odin's Wife: Mother Earth in Germanic Mythology by William P. Reaves © 2010

### Odin's Wife, Jörð

“It is uncertain whether the names Fjörgyn, Hlóðyn, Fold and Grund (all meaning ‘earth’) were merely poetic synonyms for the mother of Thor created by the skalds, or whether they are various names for the old earth-goddess Jörð.”<sup>1</sup>

— John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend*, 46.

“The discovery that one and the same person, place or thing is referred to under many different names should not be surprising. If our text were skaldic verse we would accept such polyonymy simply as the poet’s method of satisfying the strict metric demands of his chosen form. But the relatively unrestricted eddic strophe is far less demanding: such an explanation can not be the only one. The massive complex of *heiti* and *kenning* structures which we are about to discuss must be the result on the one hand, of a desire to replace *tabu* lexemes with *noa* correspondencies and, on the other, of a feeling of the need for elevated and esoteric language when dealing with religious *tremendum*.<sup>2</sup>

The religious decoding of the relevant textual corpus therefore depends largely on establishing the identities obscured by polyonymy.”

—Jere Fleck, “Óðinn’s Self-Sacrifice, A New Interpretation. II: The Ritual Landscape”, *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 4, 1971

Earth (Jörð) is a rather obscure figure in Old Icelandic literature. Physical descriptions of her are few and mainly refer to her as a personification of the land. A verse by Hallfreðr vanræðaskald preserved by Snorri refers to Earth as “Baleyg’s [Odin’s] broad-faced-bride”, whereas Martin L. West notes that “broad” is the most

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<sup>1</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 179, s.v. Jörð.

<sup>2</sup> See Heiler, *Religion*, pp. 266ff.

common epithet of the earth-goddess in Indo-European poetic tradition.<sup>3</sup> In the third verse of Þjóðólfr Árnorrson's *Sexstefja* (*Fagrskinna*, ch. 51), Earth is described as *haglfaldinni*, "hail-hooded", an allusion which compares snow-capped mountains to the white linen of a woman's headdress. Elsewhere in Old Icelandic sources, Jörd is said to be *eiki grónu*, "grown with oak" (Guðorm Sindri's *Hákonardrápa* 5); *barrhadduð*, "fir-tressed" and *víði gróna*, "grown with woodland" (Hallfreðr vanræðaskald's *Hákonardrápa*). The expression *haddr Jarðar*, "Jörd's tresses" is a kenning for grass.

Several scholars assume that Jörd was once a powerful goddess in her own right, but surprisingly, we learn very little of her in our sources. She is typically defined by her relationship to others. In *Gylfaginning* 9, Snorri states that the Earth is Odin's wife and daughter and that with her he begot the first of his sons, Asa-Thor,<sup>4</sup> although there is no other evidence in support of Jörd being Odin's daughter.<sup>5</sup> In *Gylfaginning* 10, Snorri provides additional detail:

Norfi or Narfi was the name of a giant who lived in Jotunheim. He had a daughter named Night. She was black and dark in accordance with her ancestry. She was married to a man named Naglfari. Their son was called Aud. Next she was married to someone called Annar. Their daughter was called Jörd [Earth]. Her last husband was Delling, he was of the race of the Aesir. Their son was Day. He was bright and beautiful in accordance with his nature.

If we attempt to reconcile the statements of *Gylfaginning* 9 and 10, we must accept that Annar (or Onar, Jörd's father) is another name for Odin, yet Annar is not recorded among Odin's epithets in any of our sources, including Snorri's *Edda*. In the *Prologue* to *Gylfaginning*, we find Annar as the name of a descendant of Thor, who is portrayed as the grandson of Priam, king of Troy, and a remote ancestor of Odin, a migrant from Asia who came north with his wife Frigg to establish the Aesir dynasty in Sweden.<sup>6</sup> Snorri knew *Priði* ("Third") as an Odin-name and perhaps at some point assumed that *Annar* ("Second") was another, but, however one interprets them, the two statements cannot be easily reconciled. John Lindow has labeled Snorri's statements in *Gylfaginning* 9 and 10 a "confused discussion" and attempts to sort it out, explaining that "Snorri's use of the definite article in this passage (*Gylf.* 9) suggests a desire to keep separate the earth and the goddess Jörd (Earth)."<sup>7</sup> This, however, does little to clear up the confusion.

Based on *Gylfaginning* 10, many modern scholars often classify Jörd as a giantess, although her *ætt* is never explicitly stated in the sources. Snorri informs us that she is the granddaughter of the giant Norfi. Her mother is Norfi's daughter, the giantess Night. Because she is descended from giants, many scholars have assumed that Jörd is one too. John Lindow states: "Jörd must have been a giantess in the beginning."<sup>8</sup> While this assumption may seem reasonable, upon reflection it is important to note that other beings who have giantesses as mothers are not automatically classified as giants.

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<sup>3</sup> West, *ibid.*, p. 178, which notes that analogous expressions occur in Germanic verse: the Old High German poem *Muspilli* 58, speaks of *daz preita wasal*, 'the broad wetland'; and Old English poetry of *widere eorþan* (*Genesis* 1348) and *Widsith* 51 of *geond ginne grund*, cp. *Judith* 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Jörðinn var dóttir hans ok kona hans* (Odin's).

<sup>5</sup> McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> See Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson Edda*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, p. 205, s.v. Jörd (Earth).

<sup>8</sup> *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, p. 205, s.v. Jörd (Earth).

Although born of the giantess Bestla, Odin and his brothers are not Jötuns. Conversely, if Jörd is a giantess, her son Thor is not. If one would take paternity as the determining factor, he should recall that Snorri identifies Jörd as Odin's wife and daughter in *Gylfaginning* 9, and that the god Tyr's father and paternal grandmother are said to be giants in *Hymiskviða* 11 and 8. Thus we have reason to question the scholarly assumption that Jörd is a giantess. No specific source supports this supposition. Snorri himself classifies Jörd among the Asynjes. After enumerating the primary goddesses of Asgard in *Gylfaginning* 35, he writes: *Jörð, móðir Þórs, ok Rindr, móðir Vála, eru talðar með ásynjum*, "Jörd, the mother of Thor, and Rind, the mother of Vali, are tallied among the Asynjes." (*Gylfaginning* 36). John McKinnell rightly remarks that "they do not really belong there,"<sup>9</sup> but other scholars are equally inclined to rank Jörd as a goddess. Rudolf Simek writes:

"In the late heathen period, as recorded in our oldest literary sources, Jörð appears to have only been known as Thor's mother, and she plays no further role as an earth-goddess —as she certainly once was."<sup>10</sup>

Jörd is chiefly defined by her relationship to others. In a prose passage in *Skáldskaparmál* 32, Snorri provides a number of paraphrases for earth and cites some skaldic verses as examples. Among the paraphrases for Earth provided there, Snorri lists: *móður Þórs*, "mother of Thor"; *brúði Óðins*, "bride of Odin"; *dóttur Ónars*, "daughter of Onar"; *dóttir Náttar*, "daughter of Night"; *systir Auðs ok Dags*, "sister of Aud and Day." Notably, not all of the expressions Snorri provides find support in the provided verses. The verses cited confirm that the heathen poets recognized Jörd as the bride of Odin, the daughter of Onar, the sister of Aud, and Thor's mother.<sup>11</sup> No known verses directly support the earth-kennings "Night's daughter" and "Day's sister", although two verses preserved in the Eddaic poem *Sigrdrífumál* may point in this direction:

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<sup>9</sup> McKinnell, *ibid.*, p. 156; Her almost total lack of characterization is noticeable enough that scholars occasionally comment on it, for example McKinnell remarks that even today a young man cannot afford to acknowledge that it was his mother who made him a man, as such an admission can potentially discredit him as a 'mother's boy.' He observes: "...This may explain why, although Þórr is often called the son of Jörð (or Fjörgynn or Hlöðyn), Jörð never appears as a character in the poems about Thor." (p. 182 ).

<sup>10</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 179, s.v. Jörð.

<sup>11</sup> In two verses by Hallfreðr the troublesome, cited by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* 32, Earth is spoken of as the "tree-grown only daughter of Onar [i.e. Annar]", "Baleyg's [Odin's] broad-faced-bride" and "Aud's splendid sister."

*Heill dagr!  
Heilir dags synir!  
Heil nótt ok nipt!  
Óreiðum augum  
lítið okkr þinig  
ok gefið sitjöndum sigr!*

*Heilir æsir!  
Heilar ásynjur!  
Heil sjá in fjölnýta fold!  
Mál ok mannvit  
gefið okkr mærum tveim  
ok læknishendr, meðan lifum.*

Hail the Æsir!  
Hail the Asyniur!  
Hail to the bounteous earth!  
Words and wisdom  
give to us noble twain,  
and healing hands while we live.

Hail Day!  
Hail Day's sons!  
Hail Night and *nipt!*  
With placid eyes  
behold us and  
give those sitting here victory.

If these verses can be taken together and associated, Night and *nipt*, who appear in the third line of the first verse, and who are associated with Day and the sons of Day there, may be related to “the bounteous earth” which appears in the third line of the second verse. The word *nipt* means a female relative; it can mean a sister, a daughter or a niece.<sup>12</sup> Here it is generally taken to mean “daughter”, corresponding to Snorri’s statement that Jörd is the daughter of Night.

In popular accounts of Old Norse mythology, Jörd is best known as the mother of Thor. In a verse Snorri cites as evidence of this relationship, the skald Eyvind Skaldaspillir refers to Earth as “the mother of the giant’s enemy.” Thor is the well-known foe of giants and Earth is equally well-known to be his mother. This designation is supported by several poetic passages, leaving no doubt that “mother of Thor” is a genuine Earth-kenning.<sup>13</sup> However, when examining the evidence contained in skaldic and Eddic poetry, one finds that Earth is designated as the “mother of Thor” relatively few times. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the skalds more often refer to Earth as “Odin’s wife,” typically substituting one of his many epithets for his name. At least 19 kennings of this type are found. In fact, these constitute the most common type of earth kenning, occurring about three times as often as the “Thor’s mother” type:

- beðja niðjar Bors* "bedmate of son of Borr" (Egill, lausvisa 21, Eg.30)  
*vina her-Gauts* "mistress of host-Gautr" (Bragi: *Ragnarsdrápa* 5 = *Skáldskaparmál* 156)  
*ekkjja Svölnis* "widow of Svölnir" (Þjóðólfr, *Haustlög* 15, *Skáldskaparmál* 66)  
*vára Svölnis* "wife of Svölnir" (Eyvindr: lausvisa 12, Hkr. I.102)  
*brúðr val-Týs* "bride of slain-Týr" (Eyvindr: *Háleygjatal* 15, Fsk.86)  
*man Yggs* "maiden of Yggr" (Tindr, *Drápa* 8)  
*biðkván Þriðja (barrhödduð)* "waiting wife of Þriði" (Hallfreðr, *Hákonardrápa* 3, *Skáldskaparmál* 10)  
*brúðr Báleygs (breiðleit)* "bride of Báleygr" (Hallfreðr: *Hákonardrápa*; *Skáldskaparmál* 119)  
*brúðr Yggjar* "bride of Yggr" (Eyjólfur dáðaskáld, *Bandadrápa* 3, HkrI.118)  
*víf Óska (munlaust)* "wife of Óski" (Óttarr svartir, *Óláfsdrápa sænska* 2, *Skáldskaparmál*.383)  
*beðja Þundar* "bedmate of Þundr" (Grettir, *Ævikviða* 7, Grett.42)  
*elja Rindar (ómynd)* "rival of Rindr" (Þjóðólfr, *Sexstefja* 3, Fsk.186, *Skáldskaparmál*.122)  
*drós Þrós* "lady of Þrór" (Haukr, *Íslendingadrápa* 17)  
*víf Hárs* "wife of Hárr" (*Nóregskonungatal* 20)  
*man Yggjar* "maiden of Yggr" (*Nóregskonungatal* 47)  
*mála bága ulfs* "beloved of enemy of wolf" (Snorri, *Háttatal* 3)  
*rúna vinar Míms* "wife of friend of Mímr" (Snorri, *Háttatal* 3)  
*mála geir-Týs (græn)* "girlfriend of spear-Týr" (Sturla, *Hákonarkviða* 21)  
*beðja Svölnis* "bedmate of Svölnir" (Einarr Gilsson, *Selkolluvísur* 20)<sup>14</sup>

In these examples, the paraphrase “Odin’s wife” is understood as a circumlocution simply meaning “earth.” Poets compare a ruler’s control over the land with Odin’s dominance

<sup>12</sup> Cleasby/Vigfusson Dictionary, p. 455, s.v. *nipt*.

<sup>13</sup> In *Þrymskviða* 1 and *Lokasenna* 58, Thor is called *Jarðar burr*, Earth’s son and in *Völuspá* 56 he is *Hlödýnjar mögr*, “Hlodyn’s boy,” and *Fjörgynjar burr*, “Fjorgyn’s son.” *Þórsdrápa* 15 refers to Thor as *konr Jarðar*, “the son of Earth” and *Haustlög* 14 calls him *jarðar sunr*, “Earth’s son.”

<sup>14</sup> The textual examples were generously provided by Eysteinn Björnsson. The conclusions drawn from them, however, are my own and do not necessarily reflect Mr. Björnsson’s views.

over Jörd, suggesting to scholars that Odin took her by force.<sup>15</sup> These verses refer to Jörd as the bride of Odin, the sister of Aud, and the daughter of Onar. A verse by Þjóðólfr Árnorrson additionally identifies her as *elju Rindar* (Rind’s rival).

According to the Eddaic poem *Baldurs Draumr* 11, Rind bore Odin a son named Vali, who was fated to avenge Baldur’s death by killing his brother Hödur. The myth must have been well known as Rind and Vali are mentioned elsewhere in skaldic and Eddaic poetry, as well as in the Danish histories of Saxo Grammaticus, who tells the story of their encounter in some detail.<sup>16</sup> Þjóðólfr informs us that “Rind’s rival” (the Earth) was taken *ómynda*, “without a bride-price,” apparently indicating that Odin took Jörd from her father by force. Likewise, much has been made of a single reference to Jörd as an abandoned wife of Odin, which occurs in a verse by Hallfredr. The reading and the conclusions drawn from it, however, are tenuous, as most manuscripts read *bifkván*, “trembling wife” rather than *bíðkvan*, “waiting” or “abandoned wife.” Even so, this abandonment could just as easily refer to the flight of Hakon’s predecessor from Norway (cp. *Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar*, ch. 16).<sup>17</sup> In these verses it is difficult to decide whether the reference is to the mythical Jörd or literally to the land.<sup>18</sup> The interpretation depends as much on the view of the scholar as it does the text.

In *Skáldskaparmál* 32, Snorri says that Earth may be called “the rival of Frigg and Rind and Gunnlod.”<sup>19</sup> But, of these, only the expression “Rind’s rival” is supported by a poetic citation. We cannot independently verify whether the expressions “Frigg’s rival” and “Gunnlod’s rival” are genuine poetic paraphrases for Earth or if they are back-formations created by the author on the model of *elju Rindar*. As it stands, neither are found in existing skaldic poetry. Relevant here too, Snorri states in *Skáldskaparmál* 27 that Odin’s wife Frigg can *also* be called “the rival of Rind,” as well as “the rival of Jörd and Gunnlod.” Thus, according to Snorri, the poetic paraphrases “Rind’s rival” and “Gunnlod’s rival” apply equally to Jörd and Frigg. But, since the earth-kennings “Frigg’s rival” and “Gunnlod’s rival” are not found in existing poetic sources,<sup>20</sup> it is conceivable that Snorri created them based on the genuine poetic expression “Rind’s rival” (*elja Rindar*). Therefore we have good reason to suspect the validity of the term “Frigg’s rival” as an authentic kenning for Earth, and likewise the validity of the term “Earth’s rival” as an authentic kenning for Frigg.

While Earth is well-known as “the wife of Odin” in the poetic sources, it should be noted that Odin is never called “the husband of Earth.” Instead, he is known as the “husband of Frigg,” and once as the “husband of Gunnlod”<sup>21</sup>.

*angan Friggjar*, “‘sweet scent’ of Frigg,” *Völuspá* 56  
*faðmbyggvir Friggjar*, “dweller in Frigg’s embrace,” *Haraldskvæði* 12  
*frumverr Friggjar*, “foremost husband of Frigg,” Hallfredr vandræðaskald, Lv.  
*farmr arma Gunnlaðar*, “arm burden of Gunnlod,” Steinþórr<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 154, cp. Ursula Dronke, *Poetic Edda, Vol. II*, p. 397.

<sup>16</sup> *Grougaldur* 6, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 23, *Völuspá* 34, *Váfrúðnismál* 51; *Gesta Danorum*, Book 3; and a verse by Kormak in *Skáldskaparmál* 55.

<sup>17</sup> McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> *elju Friggjar ok Rindar ok Gunnlaðar*.

<sup>20</sup> McKinnell, *ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> Odin’s relationship with Gunnlod can justifiably be characterized as a marriage, cp. *Hávamál* 104-110. See David A. H. Evans, *Hávamál*, pp. 120-123.

While Odin is known to have had other lovers than his wife Frigg, there can be little doubt that the first thing that would have occurred to a heathen audience hearing the expression “Odin’s wife” would have been Frigg, Odin’s traditional partner since the earliest recorded sources. Godan (Odin) and Frea (Frigg) first appear as husband and wife in the 8<sup>th</sup> century *History of the Lombards*. They next appear together on German soil in the 10<sup>th</sup> century’s *Second Merseberg Charm*. A skaldic kenning refers to the gods as “Frigg’s progeny.”<sup>23</sup> In Eddaic poetry, Odin and Frigg appear as husband and wife in *Völuspá*, *Grimnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna*, and *Hrafnagaldur Oðins*. In contrast, Odin and Jörd are never named as partners.

In skaldic poetry, we encounter a logical paradox without precedent. There the kenning “Odin’s wife” is a poetic term which means earth, but rather than designating Odin’s wife Frigg as the earth-goddess, it is exclusively interpreted to designate a virtually unknown giantess named Jörd! Because Snorri presents Jörd and Frigg as distinct personalities, we have been conditioned to think of them as separate entities. Thus, in skaldic poetry, we take most references to Earth literally, accepting that she is Thor's mother, Aud's sister, and Annar's daughter, except in one case—the most frequently occurring—where we are supposed to take the designation figuratively. Instead of interpreting “Odin’s wife” as his traditional spouse, we are invited to interpret the phrase to mean one, and only one, of his giantess-concubines. In skaldic poetry alone, the expressions: “Odin's wife, bride, lady beloved, bedmate”, etc. are taken to mean Earth (Jörð), while in all other poetic and prose sources “Odin’s wife” is understood to mean the goddess Frigg. This is not only illogical, but unnecessary.

Following the same reasoning, we could just as easily understand the term "Odin's wife" to mean any female with whom Odin has had sexual relations. Instead of referring exclusively to Jörð, we might imagine that the kennings in question indicated Frigg, Gunnlod or Rind, since, by this definition, they too are Odin's "wives." Yet this is clearly not the case. In the context of skaldic poetry, the expression “Odin’s wife” obviously indicates the Earth. Since Frigg is recognized as Odin’s wife in every other case, it seems reasonable to conclude that Odin’s wife Frigg is identical to Jörd, the Earth. Only Snorri’s statements in the *Prose Edda* prevent us from drawing this conclusion with confidence.

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<sup>22</sup> To this list, I am tempted to add the expression “father of Baldur” (*faðir Baldrs*), since Baldur is well-known to be the son of Frigg.

<sup>23</sup> *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 79 ; *Complete Sagas of the Icelanders I*, p. 151